Male Consumers Entering the Private Sphere: an Exploratory Investigation of French Male Involvement, Practices and Interactions Around Lingerie For Men Consumption

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Male Consumers Entering the Private Sphere: An Exploratory Investigation of French Male Involvement, Practices and Interactions Around the Lingerie for Men Consumption

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Abstract
Consumer research literature lacks male consumers’ conceptualization (Schroder and Zwick, 2004; Elliott and Elliott, 2005). Important changes in society among men and women and their relationships have an impact on the marketplace (Kimmel and Tissier-Desbordes, 2000). Men are more concerned with appearance. Nevertheless, this consumption is subject to taboos. In this paper, we present and discuss the findings of an exploratory investigation of French men consumption of new and highly symbolic products: the lingerie for men. We describe the moments of life favourable to this consumption, prescriptors’ roles. Also, male interactions with women (couple) and with male peers are investigated.

Introduction
Male consumers entering the private sphere: an exploratory investigation of French male involvement, practices and interactions around the lingerie for men consumption

There is a lack in the literature as regard to male consumers’ conceptualization (Holt and Thompson, 2004; Schroder and Zwick, 2004; Elliott and Elliott, 2005, Tuncay, 2006). Important changes in society among men and women and their relationships have an impact on the marketplace (Kimmel and Tissier-Desbordes, 2000). Men are becoming concerned with appearance more of a traditional feminine territory. Brands develop successfully the jewellery, the lingerie and cosmetics. Nevertheless, this consumption is subject to taboos leading men to negotiate the legitimate/unacceptable behaviours through their consumption choices. In this paper, following a literature review of masculinity, intimacy and consumer research, we present and discuss the findings of an exploratory investigation of French men consumption of new and highly symbolic products: the lingerie for men.

Firstly, the research objective is to reveal the process of men involvement in a new practice of consumption strongly embedded in a feminine culture. Secondly, we aim to discover the interactions within the straight couple, with women and with the peers about this practice.

Data and Methodology
Authors conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 French men since late 2005 focusing on lingerie for men consumption. This was to try to capture a trend in social sciences analyzing male as entering the realm of intimacy as a major sign of changing masculinity (de Singly, 2001, Welzer-Lang, 2004, Castelain-Meunier, 2005…).

Authors managed to find almost all the informants “among people in the entourage or among people that could introduce me to people they know” (Bourdieu, 1993, P907).

The criteria for selection of interviewees has been based on their participation in this behaviour for some of them (12 although informants interviewed (21 in all) were of varying ages, sexual orientations and backgrounds (students, working and retired men). Individual interviews were of between one and two hours’ duration and carried out in Paris, Marseille and Aix-en-Provence (respondents’ houses). Interviews were taped, recorded and the respondents were offered the opportunity to view the transcripts.

Results and Discussion
Describing the involvement process of male consumers in underwear
Functional vs. Aesthetic underwear is italicized through the respondent’s discourses.

Moments of life
As far as buying underwear is concerned, it is obviously not possible to date the appearance of such an ordinary practice. Yet, it was possible to identify triggering events of new practices of consumption through the informants’ discourses.

- Reaching adolescence, Reaching 30, Working, Moving to a big city and Settling in a relationship

From neophyte to specialist: several mediations
Women’s initiation. Most of the practising interviewees seem to be integrated in an aesthetic network mainly made of women, friends, and inside which develops a specific sociability on exchanging aesthetic information, beauty advices, which enables the creation of new social bonds between men and women. Women’s interaction in the building of men’s appearance can also be seen through the influential role of the partner. Another central feminine figure, which accompanies the man in his building of his appearance, is the mother figure.

But men’s learning is not only done by a female mediation, interviewees referred to the gay mediation and also the impact of new men’s magazines
Exploring interactions inside straight couples and with the male peers about this traditionally “risky” practice
The interactions in the couple about men buying “aesthetic underwear”
We analyse here the interactions within straight couples. Respondents often considered this as leading to a new interaction in the couple. 2 kinds of messages emerge:

- A hedonist mode
- A play mode
We can wonder if the strength of this couple practice is not due, in a certain way, to the fact that it is a “clandestine” male practice. Therefore, men’s purchase of underwear seems valorised by their partner.

Those practices are underlined by the idea that, in a couple, man and woman must care both about their looks in order to prove they care about each other: man and woman both remain in a seduction balance:

Nevertheless, this balance can break when the man cares more about himself than the woman does.

Men’s interactions about the consumption of men’s underwear

What kinds of interactions are there between the group of men, the masculine sphere of friends and family, and our interviewees, regarding this booming of female-inspired underwear? Do ‘practicing men’ talk about how they worry about their appearance amongst their peers?

- The countermodel of the father

The majority of practising interviewees’ fathers do not seem to worry about the way they look, or even be familiar with it. Age seems to be a discriminating factor. This recurring father/son opposition can be interpreted as an opposition of generations.

- Dealing with the risks of masculine stigmatisation

Beyond this lack of interest, the relation with masculinity is at stake. Indeed, many men today believe that taking care of oneself or worrying about underwear is something typically feminine. This is why many men often stigmatise those practices as “effeminate”, gay, as anti-masculine. The ideal image of a man partly remains the “tough man”.

- The « secret garden »

Thus, fearing about being stigmatised by other men as deviant brings a certain kind of control: the secret, expressed through the interviews.

- Avoided and unspoken subjects:

Even with those who seem to put up with their practices and claim it, it is possible to hear a contradictory discourse, which reveals an issue: dealing with risks of being stigmatised by men. On the one hand, they claim to deny the notion of male taboo as for buying underwear. On the other hand, i.e. in the facts, we notice that some of the interviewees who “put up” with their choice of taking care of themselves avoid their male peers. Within the masculine “between us” (different from the couple’s) men’s sociability rejects any references with an aesthetic intimacy, judged as anti-masculine.

Conclusion

Theoretical and managerial implications are the revelation of men’s moments of life and situations that are favourable to male entrance in the appearance/intimacy consumption as well as the way key prescriptors guide men in a new masculine consumer culture.

Also, this paper is consistent with previous research showing social fears expressed by male consumers about the legitimacy of male beauty practices (Elliott and Elliott, 2005, Kimmel and Tissier-Desbordes, 2000, Rinallo, 2007). Stigmatisations risks by male peers were more explicitly revealed while male interactions with women, especially in the privacy of the couple seem to encourage this consumption.

References